

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL KEVIN BERGNER,  
DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF FOR STRATEGIC EFFECTS, MULTINATIONAL FORCE IRAQ, VIA  
TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TOPIC: HIGH-LEVEL FOREIGN TERRORISTS WHO HAVE BEEN  
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GEN. BERGNER: Kevin Bergner speaking.

CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): Yes, sir.  
General Bergner, welcome to the bloggers roundtable this morning. Thank you,  
sir, for being with us. And we're ready when you are, sir.

GEN. BERGNER: Okay. I'll give you guys just a couple of opening  
comments and then be glad to entertain your questions.

And as kind of retrospective, I would give you a sense that in July, we  
captured or killed some 18 senior al Qaeda leaders. Six of those 18 were  
what we call senior emirs, in charge of terrorist units or some sort of  
significant functional areas within AQI.

Seven of them were either foreign terrorists or weapons facilitators,  
and three were cell leaders. Two were leaders within the AQI's media and  
propaganda networks -- and probably the most noteworthy we have talked about,  
which was Khaled al-Mashhadani, the number-one Iraqi in the organization. But  
there have been a number of others just in the last week that are significant as  
well. You probably saw reports of the al Qaeda Iraq emir of Mosul, a guy named  
Safi, who was actually located and engaged by the 2nd Iraqi Army Division in  
Mosul and was killed in the process of their attempt to detain him.

The other guy that is -- a significant action took place in Samarra,  
where coalition forces conducted operations against Haitham Sabah al-Badri, who  
was involved in both the attacks on the golden mosque and was a significant  
leader of the terrorist organizations there in Samarra.

We are in the process of hanging a summary of the 18 on the -- on our  
website. It'll be just a little while, because we've got to do an interview  
here with some Arab folks first. And once we do get that out, it'll be  
available to you there in detail.

Even after the progress that we're making, we also are quick to remind  
people that we know that al Qaeda still has the capability to conduct these  
barbaric spectacular attacks, as we saw in Tall Afar this week, with a truck  
bomb that killed some 27 people and injured some 50 others. And so we're

continuing to focus our pressure on the IED and the VBIED networks and keep the pressure on every aspect of the al Qaeda operations and their affiliates.

There has been some tactical momentum achieved, though, in July, into the first week now of August. And we have continued to see the results of some of those successful operations, not just against the AQI but also against these special groups.

And one of the ways they see this progress is manifested in what took place this past Sunday at the Abu Hanifa mosque located in Adhamiya here in Baghdad. What happened that triggered this was two nephews of a Baghdad sheikh were murdered, and the terrorists who killed these two men then sought sanctuary in the Abu Hanifa mosque.

Local citizens went into the mosque to capture these guys and coordinated with the Iraqi army, who provided a cordon around the mosque. And you understand the sensitivity associated with -- anytime coalition forces have to be involved in a mosque. So this was a case where the local citizens came forward, they worked with the Iraqi army, and in the process they not only detained 13 suspects in the mosque, but they also found a large weapons cache in the mosque's courtyard that included several mortar systems, rocket propelled grenades, two IEDs and some small arms.

And then in subsequent operations, as the Iraqi army and these citizens continued to work together, they found a car bomb outside and additional weapons caches associated with the mosque. So General Kazim, who's one of my Iraqi army counterparts for Fard al-Qanun, the Operation Law and Order in Baghdad, said this is a great example of actions by the Iraqi army and local citizens that showed that religious places are for worship and not to store weapons to be used against innocent victims.

So I just wanted to give you a sense that the result of some of our tactical operations is having a direct effect on Iraqis' abilities and willingness to step forward and work on -- work together with their own security forces.

There were three other sections of Baghdad where we saw this as well.

In Ghazalia, citizen volunteers are now helping to augment checkpoints. And, you know, the idea here is citizens in a neighborhood know who's supposed to be there and who's not. And so when they're involved, working with the security forces there on a 24-hour a day basis, it really helps improve the security.

In Bata (sp) village in Baghdad province, the citizens took steps to alert security forces and identified an AQI safe house, a weapons cache.

And then in Hurriyah, the same sort of thing. So you're seeing Iraqi citizens step up in places where the security situation and in particular population security has improved.

You're also seeing the Iraqi government being able to connect with its own citizens and get out and do its job, and yesterday, the national security advisor took a team of five deputy ministers to Baqubah. They walked through the main street of Baqubah, they talked to the people in the different shops, and then they met with the governor and the chief of the provincial council to

figure out how to further improve the food distribution system and fuel deliveries and so forth.

So again, that's the second major Iraqi leader going to Baqubah. I think the prime minister went last week or 10 days or so ago to specifically reach out to one of these provinces where we've had some major offensive operations to move out al Qaeda and re-establish the necessary network and linkages between the provincial and the Iraqi government.

And then the last point I would make is that in addition to connecting the Iraqi government and allowing the Iraqi people to step up and work more closely with their own forces and us, reconstruction on all these places is proceeding. In Anbar province, some place we've talked about where the level of security incidents, is at a three-year low. The Anbar provincial council has provided with about \$49 million. They've got about 86 different projects under way from health care to roads and electricity. So you're seeing the Iraqi government with the coalition supporting it trying to make this a tangible improvement of a lot of the lives of Iraqis.

So tactical momentum, continued pressured against al Qaeda and the special groups, and we see some significant response from the Iraqi people in the government in trying to build on that at the local level in particular.

That's our update, and with that, I will yield to your questions.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, sir.

Brigadier General Kevin Bergner with us, bloggers roundtable. General Bergner's deputy chief of staff, Strategic Effects, Multinational Force Iraq.

Andrew, you were first on the line, so why don't you get us started.

Q General, good afternoon. Andrew Lubin from U.S. Cavalry ON Point. Appreciate the time to talk to you again. Sir, there's a report in the news this morning from my friends in Baghdad about a big operation in Sadr City, 32 dead so far, helicopter attacks. Can you tell us who you're going after and what's happening over there?

GEN. BERGNER: Andrew, we continue to mount operations against militia extremist groups frequently supported by Iranian Qods Force, in particular those who are behind the EFP attacks against our forces as well as the Iraqi forces, and that was the nature of the operation earlier this morning in, again, eastern Baghdad was to target a group of individuals who were involved in EFPs and were engaged by our forces. In the process of that operation, about 30 enemy were killed in that action, and 12 others were detained by the coalition. That's one operation. I think I mentioned that in last few weeks some 20 special groups' leaders of various levels have either been captured or killed by coalition forces, and eight of those operations actually were conducted by Iraqi forces.

So that was the nature of the operation this morning, and we are continuing to work very hard to locate those, and seek to either capture or kill those involved.

Q Is the operation still ongoing or is it wrapped up now?

GEN. BERGNER: That operation has been completed, and we are moving on to --

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

Bruce McQuain.

Q How are you, General? Bruce McQuain with QandO.

GEN. BERGNER: Hey, Bruce.

Q My question has really to do with the 18 senior AQIs that you've taken out in the last month and if you can give us a sense of the degradation or the effect that's had on AQI operations.

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah, well, what we see is, the collective result of this is, they are not able to maintain the same coherence in their command and control and their planning and direction of operations. And so they spend more of their time having to regenerate and re-establish the leadership connections.

We have seen also, in the last six weeks or so, we have seen indications that al Qaeda has actually sent more people into Iraq to try to shore up the al Qaeda in Iraq network. And we've talked before about Khalid, Khalil and Khatab al-Turki, who were sent here to bolster a foreign fighter facilitation network, specifically because of the impact that al Qaeda was feeling from coalition operations. So you see it both in terms of their ability to command and control and you also see it in terms of their ability to maintain the flow of foreign fighters and other resources that they depend on.

Q Thanks.

GEN. BERGNER: And I would just follow up by saying, we'd still know though that they continue to have the capability to mount those horrendous attacks, the ones that have the greatest tragic impact on the Iraqi people in particular, but also in terms of inciting sectarian violence and the backlash that comes from those kinds of attacks. So we still have a lot of work to do. It's still a hard fight.

Q Appreciate it.

MR. HOLT: And Grim.

Q Good morning, General, or afternoon, I suppose, where you are.

I wanted to ask you a little bit about the political progress that is going on. The e-mail that was sent out about this conference said you wanted to talk a bit about the reconciliation efforts. Do you see a lot of progress on that score these last several weeks?

GEN. BERGNER: Well, we have seen steady developments at the local level. And if you just went back over the last four weeks and kind of walked around west and northern areas of Baghdad, you would find that in Ramadi, they completed the Ramadi Covenant, which was a tribal-led but government-of-Iraq-involved and coalition -- or security-force-involved commitment to stop the violence and to work together.

In Taji, about three weeks ago the sheikhs of Taji got together. They all signed a map, put their name next to the town that they represent. In Khalis, northwest of Baghdad, a similar commitment, I think by some 16 sheikhs representing 70-some others. And then in Baqubah, we've talked before about the tribal sheikhs and the provincial government and their security forces having reached some agreements on how they're going to work together and stop the violence.

So I could take you through Baghdad, as well. We've seen similar -- similar arrangements being grouped together in Amiriyah. We see similar ones in Ghazalia. The Ghazalia volunteers are now part of this local security force that's working with Iraqi and coalition forces. And then if I took you to south of Baghdad, in General Rick Lynch's area of operations in MND-Center, I could show you different groupings of 100 here, 400 there, where different individuals from the community have stepped forward and said, we want to stop help the violence, we want to work toward some sort of accommodation.

So there is a steady development at the local level as security improves and people feel like they can step forward and take that on. So we are encouraged by that.

And you know overall in Anbar what that -- how that has profoundly changed. We've talked about that several times. And that's probably the most striking example of a place which just eight or 10 months ago nobody could have foreseen the change there.

So, lots of momentum. Much of it is enabled by the tactical momentum that the surge of operations is providing. But again, much work still to do. Still some very difficult ways ahead.

Q I'd like to ask a quick follow-up about that. Under Saddam and, you know, for what amounts to living memory in Iraq, Iraq has been kind of a top-down society where the central government set the tone. What you're talking about is a lot of local efforts that are going to be kind of brought to bear -- I don't want to say against central government, but on the central government. Do you think that the nature of Iraqi society is changing in this regard, that it's becoming more of a bottom-up society, a locally driven society?

GEN. BERGNER: You know, that's a very good question, it's an interesting one, because on one level, it has been a centrally governed country, without question, but in this country the tribe, the family have always been the most powerful bond that the Iraqi people have felt. And so you have kind of a duality of centrally directed but, if you ask the people who they trust and who they want to work with, it's at the family, tribal and community level. So both of those exist and both of them are very real parts of the nature of Iraqi society.

What I hope you got a sense of in my initial comments was both of those are working, and if you looked at Baqubah as a pretty vivid example, that's a place where the local tribes and security forces are coming to these kinds of arrangements. And once they've gotten to that point, the Iraqi government, the central government, is coming in to connect and figure out so how do we provide this public distribution support that you need, because, as you said, that is a centrally directed food distribution program; how do we help improve the availability of fuel, because, as you said, that is a centrally controlled fuel distribution system still.

So both of those are at work here, and that's really why it's so important to get them connected because you really need -- you need that confidence at the local level being reinforced and supported. They need to know their central government is going to actually do something for them.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Charlie Quidnunc.

Q Yes, General. This is Charlie Quidnunc at the Wizbang Podcast.

GEN. BERGNER: Hey, Charlie.

Q Admiral Mullen's confirmation hearing, he said that he was going to have trouble maintaining the surge past March if he were to continue the 12-months on, 15-month off troop rotation. And is the Iraqi military improving fast enough that they can pick up the slack if we decrease our troop levels over time?

GEN. BERGNER: Well, you know, in many cases the Iraqi forces are already operating at those kinds of levels. In fact, the operation that I mentioned up in Mosul against Abu Safi was conducted by the 2nd Iraqi Army Division on their own. They had a MiTT team, a transition team, with them, but this was the division commander, his G-2, and they're conducting those operations really in large scale; same with the 3rd Iraqi Army out in the western part of Nineveh province. So there are elements of the Iraqi army in particular that are quite capable. General Othman, who commands the 8th Iraqi Army Division in Diwaniyah, stands out at perhaps one of the best units in their army in southern Iraq. Having said that, there are also areas where there are areas that need a great deal more improvement, and you've seen that in the Iraqi police, you've seen that in retraining and rebluing of the national police as well. But that's coming along, and I think the prospects for the Iraqi security forces are actually quite good. But it is one of those -- you know how it -- you guys know very well that it takes a while to get through the training, development and professionalization of a force, not to mention equipping and training them to operate at those kinds of levels.

But if you look in southern Iraq, we have very little force, for the most part, in southern Iraq. You know we have very little force in northern Iraq, and so there are lots of places where the Iraqi forces and the civil government are already working together to be responsible for the security file.

Q Great. One of the things that people have been saying is that if in fact we're claiming that the surge is going to make a difference and if we left right away it would be a disaster, we're going to have to prove to them that it won't be a disaster if we gradually diminish our force.

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah. Oh, that's a good point. And the challenge here is you've got to come up with the right balance of transition and thinning out so that you don't lose the momentum and you don't lose the hard-fought gains that our soldiers have achieved -- our soldiers and Marines have achieved.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Did someone else join us?

Q Lieutenant Fishman's on, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Jarred. Go ahead.

Q Good afternoon, General. Thanks for your time. Here in Washington, we have the tactical successes which the mainstream media can no longer pretty much deny; however, the new tact is to then bring up as many disaster scenarios as they possibly can, such as today there's the bridge in the north near Kirkuk, or the dam is about to collapse and flood all of Kurdistan; or the central government's about to split up into a Shi'a civil war; and down in Basra is a total calamity, and so they spin these stories about possible worst-case scenarios. What are the possible best-case scenarios to which we can say, well, there's just as good as much a chance that this can happen as the bad things can happen?

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah. Well, that's an interesting proposition. I guess rather than paint a best-case scenario, I just kind of come back to what the reality is. I mean, the reality is what we're centered on here, and it is that with the right levels of effort by the coalition and courage at the local level, progress is definitely not only possible, it's being achieved. And the tactical momentum that's enabling that is very real. So I guess the question is, how fast that can tactical momentum and that progress at the local level be enabled and complemented by progress at the national political level? And that's an area that you know is one that's still really hard, and we just haven't seen that yet. Doesn't mean we won't, and we're still hopeful that it will come together. We hope in the next meeting that they have that maybe they will sort some of that out. But I think that the prospects are really rooted in the realities of the security forces and the people at the local level continuing to gain confidence and working together. That's where our focus is.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Anyone else? Any follow-ups real quick? You know, we're about out of time. All right. Thank you, sir. General Bergner, thank you very much for joining us today.

GEN. BERGNER: It's my pleasure. Thank you, guys, for your questions. It helps us a lot to kind of hear what the fabric of the discussion is back there, so -- and thank you, guys, very much.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, sir. We look forward to hearing from you again.

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